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A conference report

SOVIET POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

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Some 40 students of Soviet affairs from the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of State, the United States Military Academy, the RAND Corporation, and the Brookings Institution assembled in Rosslyn, Va., on 8 April 1982 for a conference on "Soviet Politics and the Media." Sponsored jointly by the Analysis Group of the Foreign Broadcast Information Service and the CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, the conference provided a framework for bringing to bear the latest evidence and judgments on working assumptions and methodologies used in analyzing Soviet politics from open sources. It was the hope of the sponsors that such an exchange of views would cast new light on the contours of the Soviet political landscape in the 1980s and sensitize analysts both to alternative approaches to the evidence and to areas of disagreement.

The conference addressed three issues:

- The interpretation of the evidence of disagreement among Soviet intellectuals and second-echelon officials that suggests a degree of pluralism in Soviet politics and policy-making.
- The weight that ought to be lent to esoteric communication as a means of interpreting power and policy conflicts in the Soviet leadership.
- The value of Soviet public pronouncements on military/theoretical questions as a source of insight into Moscow's strategic intentions—given the softening of Soviet declaratory policy in the mid-1970s.

Summary of the Discussions

I. *The Role of Policy Debate in Soviet Politics*

Chairman: John Huizenga
Discussion Leader: (b)(6)

Students of Soviet affairs have long been aware that the Soviet media are not monolithic. A broad range of groups and individuals find ways of expressing their views in the media, despite the party's claim to speak with a single voice for the Soviet people. Attentive study over the years has produced abundant evidence that debate takes place on a variety of issues, ranging from artistic or literary integrity, on the one hand, to questions of foreign and strategic policy on the other. The participants in these debates couch their arguments ambiguously, seeking to avoid overstepping the bounds of official tolerance by the selective use of authoritative texts, allegory, and Aesopian language. Thus the problem of interpreting these utterances is difficult.

Examples of such debates can be found in the writings, speeches, and interviews of such influential Soviet intellectuals and high regime officials as Georgiy Arbatov, head of the USA Institute; Aleksandr Bovin, *Izvestiya* political observer; and Vadim Zagladin, deputy head of the Central Committee's International Department. (b)(6) argued that the debates embodied in this dialogue were genuine and that they reflected the efforts of the individuals involved to influence policy. Some of the other conference participants were less inclined to ascribe such autonomy to the debates, preferring to view the commentators as speaking on behalf of, or at least with the backing of, top party leaders.

In support of his interpretation, (b)(6) relied heavily on the testimony of Soviet intellectuals themselves, with whom he is widely acquainted. They are motivated, he said, by a wide variety of professional and personal considerations, including the desire, characteristic of Russian intellectuals even in Tsarist times, to test the limits of official tolerance and their ability to outwit the censor. Their main motivation, he believes, is genuine concern about the great issues of national policy—a concern which, in the case of some of them has been expressed consistently over the course of many years.

This view of the Soviet intellectual community provided the basis for (b)(6) belief in the relevance to policy of debates among intellectuals and second-level officials. While conceding that these debates may have little connection with current policy issues, he argued that they concerned the main problems facing the Soviet intellectual community and reflected the positions of individual elites on basic issues. With this knowledge, (b)(6) said, we would be in a better position to understand the potential influence of this intellectual class—a knowledge that would be particularly valuable as some of them move up in the entourages of rising politicians.

While the group generally accepted these propositions, there was considerable debate over how to make use of them analytically. A problem noted by some was what was described as a widespread skepticism among nonspecialist audiences concerning the existence of any policy debate in the Soviet Union at all. Thus the analyst of Soviet politics faces the difficulty of getting a hearing for his analysis, let alone building a persuasive case for particular judgments on the basis of the material at hand. Prescriptions ranged from better referencing and indexing devices to increasing the analytical effort devoted to what could, after all, prove to be a window on post-Brezhnev policy.

II. *Esoteric Communication and the Leadership*

Chairman: (b)(3)(c)
Discussion Leader: (b)(6)

The second discussion, though formally addressed to maneuverings of the leadership, returned essentially to the themes of the first discussion by way of a critique of a recently distributed RAND draft study which disputed the importance of esoteric communication as an instrument of Soviet politics. (b)(6) upheld the authenticity of esoteric communication—and its utility as a source of evidence regarding Soviet leadership politics—but in so doing he revealed a view somewhat different from that expounded by

(b)(6) In (b)(6) view, manipulation by elements of the political leadership is usually involved in what (b)(6) described as genuine dialogue among intellectuals. Thus, while both agreed that debates take place, one tended to interpret them as issuing from the Politburo, the other in more pluralistic terms.

A large part of the discussion concerned a particular aspect of the RAND study, namely the view that anomalies in the Soviet press can usually be ascribed to mere accident. In the view of some of the participants, the authors of the RAND study went too far in accepting the opinion of their respondents that certain instances of what appeared to be partisan esoteric communication in the press could best be explained as accidents. A number of the participants pointed out that Soviet readers themselves are convinced that everything that appears in the Soviet press is deliberate, a conviction that tends to reinforce the efforts of editors and censors to ensure accuracy and conformity lest they give misleading signals to the public. The author of the RAND study, (b)(6) (b)(6) while conceding the virtue of some of the criticisms, defended the use of the accident hypothesis, arguing that those who contested the hypothesis were obligated to construct an alternative scenario to explain how any anomaly might have occurred.

(b)(6) bottom-line assessment of esoteric communications was that they remain "as important as any of us ever thought they were." He judged the RAND study's skepticism on the subject as useful, but probably expressed too broadly. He suggested that distinctions should be made between partisan and nonpartisan esoteric communication, and between majority and minority uses of such communication. He argued that the use of such distinctions by the RAND study would have helped to clarify the fact that it was sharply focused on only part of the spectrum, namely, "partisan esoteric communication by a minority faction." Within this framework, he said, the study took a consistent position that the phenomenon was so rare as to be of virtually negligible significance. Nevertheless, the study did admit that such cases had occurred, and this, he believed, was enough to establish the point that minority esoteric communication does take place and is a continuing challenge for analysis.

III. *The Politicization of Soviet Military/Theoretical Dialogue*

Chairman: (b)(6)
Discussion Leader: (b)(6)

The third discussion explored the hypothesis that foreign policy-inspired changes in Soviet declaratory policy on strategic issues in the 1970s may have sharply diminished the utility of unclassified Soviet pronouncements on military doctrinal themes as a source of insight into Soviet military thinking.

In opening the debate, (b)(6) suggested that there were three alternative ways of explaining the change he had sketched:

- That it marked the resolution of a doctrinal debate;
- That it reflected an overall evolution in strategic thought away from earlier war-fighting theories;
- That it was a deliberate effort to influence the West.

(b)(6) argued that alterations in Soviet declaratory policy on nuclear war issues and the doctrinal expression of that policy probably do not reflect the outcome of any great internal debate or of an evolution from a "war-fighting" to a "deterrence only" doctrine. Instead, he said, the alterations probably reflect primarily if not exclusively the politicization of Soviet military doctrinal themes for the purpose of projecting a more benign image of Soviet military policy in support of the USSR's broad "peace diplomacy" toward the West. This raises the question for analysts: what modified rules of interpretation should be applied in order to extract useful insight from this material under today's altered circumstances?

Other conference participants viewed the evolution of Soviet policy in less purposeful terms, stressing the importance of internal debate in the process. It was argued in particular that the change in declaratory policy adduced by (b)(6) (b)(6) had been accompanied by signs of debate in the Soviet press over the issue of the relative utility of military power versus diplomacy as a means of insuring security in the nuclear age. This debate, it was argued, suggested internal controversy that would have been unlikely had the point been only to influence the West.

The most extensive comment was offered by Ambassador Raymond Garthoff, who tended to see a broader range of factors at play in the evolution of Soviet military policy than allowed for by (b)(6) logical alternatives. His interpretation of the trend in Soviet military statements placed greater stress on an evolution of Soviet military thought and doctrine rather than on a deliberate effort by the leadership to influence the West. He also suggested that chance historical events, such as the death of Marshal Grechko in 1976, might have contributed to the change.

One of the more interesting aspects of the discussion was an exchange between (b)(6) and Ambassador Garthoff on the distinction between what the Soviets call the "political-theoretical" and the "military-technical" sides of their doctrine and the relevance of this distinction to the policy trend in question. (b)(6) argued that there should be a parallelism between the two and that the absence of any change in concrete military programs complementary to the change in declaratory policy suggested that the latter was primarily for political effect. Ambassador Garthoff took a reserved position on this argument, declining to rule out the possibility that doctrinal change had already affected policy and might do so in the future. At the same time, he noted that factors entirely unrelated to doctrine and policy should not be overlooked here, observing that a sense of inferiority could have played a role in the Soviets' earlier stress on superiority whereas their present cooler rhetoric might reflect a more secure strategic position.

In his concluding remarks, (b)(6) observed that the issues he had raised had been fruitfully discussed but not fully resolved by the conference. He strongly recommended a further effort by the Intelligence Community to investigate the issues with a view to reaching conclusions, if possible, on:

- Whether a change in Soviet doctrine has indeed taken place, and
- If so, what implications it carries for Soviet strategy and policy on arms control.

Conclusions

Any effort to draw conclusions from the conference should begin with recognition that the most important payoff was probably that derived by individual analysts as a result of mixing with their colleagues in a setting calculated to encourage dialogue, sharpen perceptions, and generate ideas for new research projects and approaches. At a practical level, both sponsoring organizations viewed the conference as an aid to the identification of roles they might play in the future to support the Community-wide analytic effort, and both see areas in which they might usefully contribute.

The sponsors offer the following general views on tasks to be undertaken and ideas to explore:

I. Steps should be taken to see that analysts have every possible access to collateral information on the Soviet intellectual community. This should include information from Western scholars who have visited Soviet policy institutes, from emigres who have had relevant professional contacts in the Soviet Union, and from defectors. Several of the conferees suggested this. Since the conference, FBIS Analysis Group (b)(3)(n)

II. Research is needed to clarify the implications of the new evidence that is accumulating on the role of intellectuals and policy advisors in national policy debate reflected in the media. The picture of this phenomenon that emerged from the conference appears to call for a more complex theory of Soviet politics and policy-making than that provided by the view that political initiative in the Soviet Union flows from the top down only. The Office of Soviet Analysis and FBIS both have responsibilities in responding to this need. As a first step for FBIS (b)(3)(c) of the Analysis Group is writing an article which will attempt to provide a theoretical framework for understanding current Soviet politics on the basis of evidence of political debate over foreign policy in the 1970s. On another level, Analysis Group is undertaking research aimed at systematically defining the scope of policy-related debate in the Soviet Union. This will include an identification of the principal personalities involved, the institutes which have been associated with them, and the issues which have provoked public controversy in the past and are likely to remain controversial in the next few years.

III. The Center for the Study of Intelligence, in consultation with the Agency offices concerned, should explore measures for encouraging the study of politics in the Soviet Union. This might include the sponsorship of programs under the auspices of the Center or the establishment of a fellowship for rotational assignments to an ongoing research effort. The goal of the studies should be to ensure the fullest possible exploitation of available intellectual resources on the internal political life of the Soviet Union.

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